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SHADOW VERSES

Shadow Verses

by

Gamaliel Bradford



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TO

CHARLES WHARTON STORK

*WHO FIRST GAVE THEM THE SEMBLANCE OF REALITY
THESE SHADOW VERSES EXPRESS ALL GRATITUDE*

*In what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness,
Doth womanish and fearful mankind live!*

DUCHESS OF MALFI.

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THE DIARY

I put my heart in verses,
 My secrets I disclose,
As many a man disperses
 His inmost soul in prose.

My secrets or another's,
 The scraps and shreds of time—
I leave myself and others
 A diary in rhyme.

THE TASK

I am here in nook and angle,
Oft in many a hidden spot.
Dainty task, to disentangle
Me from others, is it not?

I have passions; so have others.
They have raptures; so have I.
Their attraction mainly smothers
My obscure identity.

ARDOR

Others make verses of grace.
Mine are all muscle and sinew.
Others can picture your face.
But I, all the tumult within you.

Others can give you delight,
And delight I confess is worth giving.
But my songs must tickle and bite
And burn with the ardor of living.

THE PURSUIT

I had visited her often,
Long had sought, with vain endeavor,
Her obdurate heart to soften;
But she answered, "never, never."

Then it softened and ran widely,
Like an ink-drop on a blotter.
I ceased labor, tasted idly,
Found it bitter, and forgot her.

GOD

I think about God.
 Yet I talk of small matters.
Now isn't it odd
 How my idle tongue chatters!
Of quarrelsome neighbors,
 Fine weather and rain,
Indifferent labors,
 Indifferent pain,
Some trivial style
 Fashion shifts with a nod.
And yet all the while
 I am thinking of God.

MY VERSES

Wine of time
Whipped into rhyme,
Shreds of decay
Thus snatched away
And woven together
To outlast weather,
Quaint scraps of breath
Rescued from death.

THE BEST OF ALL

Sleep and turn and sleep again,
Spite of the morning birds.
I am weary of strife with men,
Weary of fruitless words.

Once I traveled in blossomed ways,
Ere I had learned to weep.
Sleep is better than loveless days.
Death is better than sleep.

BROWN LEAVES

The passage of dead leaves in spring
Is like the aged vanishing.
Amid the bustle and delight •
Of beauty thronging sound and sight,
Their lengthened course we hardly know
Nor mark their exit when they go.
Yet through the burst of budding green
And blossoms rich with varied sheen
A brown leaf sometimes flutters by
And breeds a sombre revery.

PERHAPS

*He who knows
What life and death is, is above all law.*
CHAPMAN.

He who knows what life and death is
Walks superior to fate.
Every word that Fortune saith is
Just accordant to his state.
Unto him indifferent breath is
Nature's bitter use and wont.
He who knows what life and death is!—
Ah, perhaps you do, I don't.

I

The study of human souls
Is the daintiest pleasure I know,
The tracing of what controls
Their passionate ebb and flow.

To follow some curious trail
In the mind's wide wilderness—
All other pursuits must pale
By the magical charm of this.

And the reason and full excuse
Which gives it a practical goal
And a manifold, infinite use,
Is that I am a human soul.

THE IDLE WIND

The idle wind blows all the day.
I wish it blew my care away.
The idle wind blows all day long
And weaves a burden to my song
Upon the melancholy flight
Of youth and beauty and delight.
The idle wind blows all the day.
I wish it blew my care away.

CHANCE

I want to sing what's righteous, but I'm apt to sing what's wrong,
For I cannot control the eccentricities of song.
My verses whirl like autumn leaves upon a windy day.
Before I've told them half my mind, they flutter far away,

Full of moonlight, love, and laughter, mixed with other dim affairs
As far removed from economic profit as from prayers.
The quaint, fantastic creatures shake their skirtless limbs and dance
And my brain goes dancing after them, the dizzy sport of chance.

THE FLECK

I have been a mystic,
Thrilled with fire divine.

I've been atheistic,
Scoffing at design.

I have been a stoic,
Stifled passion's flame.

I have been heroic—
Till disaster came.

I have been a sceptic,
Burned illusion out
With the antiseptic
Of dissolving doubt.

Now I'm merely nothing,
Fleck of foam astray,
Fancifully frothing
Till it fades away.

SHREDS

Little shreds of ecstasy
Float across the gray.
Otherwise our life would be
Stuff to cast away.

Here a kiss and there a kiss.
Love that laughter screens,
Walking through a wilderness.—
Tell me what it means.

DISORDER

My life is governed by the clock,
All duly mapped and plotted;
And only with a nervous shock
I miss the time allotted.

My course without has always been
Set straight to hedge and border;
But I confess that all within
Is vast and vague disorder.

A SOCIAL BEING

You ask me why I ride and run
With such a wild desire
And come at call of every one
With feet that never tire?

Do not believe that I adore
The creatures that I see;
But one I most of all abhor,
And I myself am he.

And yet for all my hurrying flight
To anyone I've known,
There come the dreadful hours of night
When I must be alone.

AN UNSOCIAL BEING

It is not that I hate mankind
Or their pursuits at all.
I love them every one, but find
My own the best of all.

Society of man is sweet,
Of woman even sweeter,
With varied interest replete,
Only my own replete.

For discipline I must deny
Myself myself sometimes;
But I return with luxury
To books and thought and rhymes.

THEMES

Just a few themes,
Love, God, and glory,
Laughter and dreams,
Make all my story.

I croon them idly
In the sunbeams.
How to spread widely
Just a few themes?

INELUCTABILIS

Said the spider to the fly,
“I will eat you by and by.
Roam as widely as you will.
Flaunt your wings and feed your fill.
Your capacity is quite
Ample for this world’s delight.
You will find my cold web spun
When your brief career is done.
Triumph under heaven high.
I will eat you by and by.”

THE CURTAIN

Others may seem gay and certain,
Steering one unbroken line.
But lift up the heart's dim curtain,
It might prove as frail as mine.

Full of shift and light vagary,
Thirsting, shrinking from the cup.
Truly, we had best be wary
And not lift the curtain up.

ROUSSEAU

That odd, fantastic ass, Rousseau,
 Declared himself unique.
How men persist in doing so,
 Puzzles me more than Greek.

The sins that tarnish whore and thief
 Beset me every day.
My most ethereal belief
 Inhabits common clay.

EXPENSES

I'm sick to death of money, of the lack of it, that is,
And of practising perpetually small economies;
Of paring off a penny here, another penny there,
Of the planning and the worrying, the everlasting care.

The savages went naked and no doubt digested fruit,
And when they longed for partridge all they had to do
was shoot.

But it may be Mrs. Savage was extravagant in paint
And all the little Savages made juvenile complaint.

“We want a bow like We-We’s. We want a fine canoe.
We don’t have half such dandy things as other fellers do.”
And Mrs. Savage quite agreed it was an awful shame.
So Mr. Savage sighed about expenses just the same.

HEINELET¹

He asked if she ever could love him.

She answered him, no, on the spot.

He asked if she ever could love him.

She assured him again she could not.

He asked if she ever could love him.

She laughed till his blushes he hid.

He asked if she ever could love him.

By God, she admitted she did.

¹The title of this and similar poems throughout the book does not mean that they are translated from Heine, or even paraphrased; but they are written largely under Heine's influence. Lowell told Mr. Howells to "sweat the Heine out of his blood as men do mercury," but I see no reason why one should not attempt to convey a very little of Heine's charm into English, especially as Heine himself imitated the form and spirit of earlier German lyrics.

THE ARGUMENT

I suggested the rapture of God.

They laughed at the very idea,
And it seemed to them almost as odd
As a message from Cassiopeia.

I liked Catholic ritual best.

They thought I was talking at random,
And mocked with a good deal of zest
At a trio of priests praying tandem.

I prated of mystic delight.

But to them my white dove was a pigeon,
My day divine nothing but night.
So I argued no more on religion.

ANACREON'S APOLOGY

An eye where love with laughter twinkles,
And songs on kisses still insistent,
Blended with graying hair and wrinkles,
To you, my child, seem inconsistent?

In fact, you think such conduct shocking?
The old should mind their souls and purses?
Ah, youthful blood, refrain from mocking
Till you can only kiss in verses.

MY YOUTH

Oh, my youth was hot and eager,
And my heart was burning, burning,
And the present joy seemed meagre,
Dwarfed by that perpetual yearning.

I was always madly asking
Ampler beauty, keener pleasure,
Had not wit enough for basking
In the sunshine rich with leisure.

Now with ripeness of October
I have reasoned and reflected,
And I feed my soul, grown sober,
With the crumbs that I rejected.

SISYPHUS

Old Sisyphus must roll a stone
 Forever up a weary hill.
He sighs and thinks his task is done,
 But has to recommence it still.

So we, with Adam in our bones,
 Not you, or you, but all of us,
Keep rolling, rolling, rolling stones,
 Exactly like old Sisyphus.

CRUMPLED LEAVES

Hope is always bent to fill
Life with vague anticipations.
Little drops of joy distil
From enormous expectations.

Hope has now brief field to cover,
Tedious days that flutter by;
I'm reduced to turning over
Crumpled leaves of memory.

HEINELET

Oh, what a creature am I !
 What inelegant moods I pass through.
I sin, though I cannot tell why—
 Yet just such another are you.

I stumble I cannot tell how
 Over bogs where no blossom e'er grew.
In short, I'm a fool I allow—
 But just such another are you.

THE CLOCK

I live by the clock.

It is wearing, I grant you;
For lost minutes mock
And delays always haunt you.

You cannot repair
A duty neglected,
Have little to spare
For a call unexpected,

Find leisure unknown,
Ever live in a flurry,
Must labor alone,
May die in a hurry.

All this I perceive,
The wise it should shock;
But I really believe
I was born by the clock.

THE SWING

Our life is like a twisted swing.

We start with little labor
And turning slowly ring by ring
Rise higher than our neighbor.

We twist and twist in endless strain,
With effort almost bursting;
And still, the more that we attain,
For more and more are thirsting.

Then suddenly there comes a pause,
And the untwist beginning,
When life's inexorable laws
Set the reversal spinning.

The triumph of our pain immense,
And all our boast and frothing,
Are whirled away to lack of sense
And so at last to nothing.

HOPE

When I was a little boy,
I followed hope and slighted joy.
Now my wit has larger scope,
I clutch at joy and heed not hope.

At least that doctrine I profess,
For there I know lies happiness;
But hope, for all the shifts I try,
Will be my sovereign till I die.

A THOUSAND YEARS

Just to utter a word,
That is all I require;
That may still be heard,
When I expire;
That still may glow,
Like a soft, sweet flame,
When others go,
As they lightly came;
That may still be sung,
With hopes and fears,
By a careless tongue
In a thousand years.

WHY?

Hist! Zop!
The world is all awry.
Think that you can mend it?
Take a turn and try.
Virtue gets a fall or two,
Vice careers on high.
I prefer to sing myself,
Sick of asking why.

FEAR

When I was little,
 My life was half fear.
My nerves were as brittle
 As nature may bear.

Shapes monstrous would follow
 My footsteps alone,
And night, huge and hollow,
 Yawned cold as a stone.

At trifles I started,
 For nothing I wept,
And terror departed
 Not all when I slept.

Now I've grown older,
 My nerves I restrain.
My pulses are colder,
 And clearer my brain.

Yet still with a shudder
 I drift through the dark,
And fear holds the rudder,
 A-guiding my bark.

The world's so enormous
 In multiple whole,
What god can inform us
 It cares for a soul?

COMEDY

I'm writing comedy again,
The daintiest pleasure known to men;
Unless a daintier might be
To watch your acted comedy:
The airy ladies gaily dressed,
And much adored, and much caressed,
The men who swagger like gamecocks,
Or undermine, like cunning fox,
And over all these shaken free
The spangled gleam of repartee—
No keener joy awaits us here.
And yet each day I write with fear.

NERVES

Nerves are most extraordinary,
Full of useful information,
At a moment's notice merry
With abounding cachinnation,
Then with subtle transformation,
Dreary as a cemetery
Just prepared for occupation.—
Nerves are most extraordinary.

HUNGER

I've been a hopeless sinner, but I understand a saint,
Their bend of weary knees and their contortions long and
faint,
And the endless pricks of conscience, like a hundred
thousand pins,
A real perpetual penance for imaginary sins.

I love to wander widely, but I understand a cell,
Where you tell and tell your beads because you've nothing
else to tell,
Where the crimson joy of flesh, with all its wild fantastic
tricks,
Is forgotten in the blinding glory of the crucifix.

I cannot speak for others, but my inmost soul is torn
With a battle of desires making all my life forlorn.
There are moments when I would untread the paths that
I have trod.
I'm a haunter of the devil, but I hunger after God.

GLORY

Ever since I can remember I have thirsted after glory.
And my earliest desire was to have a place in story.
When my mates were only eager for their sport or game
or pastime,
I was thinking, thinking, thinking of a name that should
outlast time.

Love distracted me and learning lured my wayward steps
a moment,
Hope to find what life's mad forces tossing blindly to and
fro meant.
I, like Obermann, have known high virtue's fierce enthusiasm,
And, like him, have found a month enough to wear away
its spasm.

But through ecstasy of lovers and through lofty dream of
learning
And through virtue's ashes still I saw ambition burning,
burning.
Snow of years, rebuffs, quips, mocks, but fed the flame
like precious ointment.
What a pity after all I should be doomed to disappointment!

LEAVES

Down come the leaves,
Like fleeting years,
Or idle tears
Of love that grieves.

A tinkling trill,
A pallid flight,
Like brief delight.—
And all is still.

LOVE'S DETECTIVE

They always called her Love's detective,
Thought her inopportune, but harmless.
She looked at life without perspective,
A dry soul, erudite and charmless.

She had a habit of appearing
Just when four lips were ripe for kissing.
"Excuse me if I'm interfering."
The mild words sounded like a hissing.

And when at last the bomb exploded
Which rent love like a wind-blown thistle,
They never knew that she had loaded,
And primed, and aimed, and fired the missile.

“I MIGHT—AND I MIGHT NOT”

I might forget ambition and the hunger for success.
I might forget the passion to escape from nothingness.
I might forget the curious dreams of ecstasy that haunt
My fancy day and night. I might forget them. But I can't.

If I could let the pen alone and leave the inkstand dry,
And forego perpetual effort to be climbing, climbing high,
And lay aside my mad designs to startle and enchant,
I might enjoy the sweet of common living. But I can't.

I might be just a Philistine, and eat, and drink, and sleep,
And drive a dusty motor and pile money in a heap,
And let the stream of life run through my brain and be
forgot.

If I did, I might be happier. I might—and I might not.

THE RIOT

You think my life is quiet.
I find it full of change,
An ever-varied diet,
As piquant as 'tis strange.

Wild thoughts are always flying,
Like sparks across my brain,
Now flashing out, now dying,
To kindle soon again.

Fine fancies set me thrilling,
And subtle monsters creep
Before my sight unwilling:
They even haunt my sleep.

One broad, perpetual riot
Enfolds me night and day.
You think my life is quiet?
You don't know what you say.

HEINELET

They walked through the meadow together,
And made the little frogs croak.
She asked him in agony whether
His wooing was merely a joke.

He said that the earth's base should sever
Ere his word and his promise he broke.
He swore he would love her forever—
And made the little frogs croak.

PROFIT

If I have the time to sing,
Golden hours to spend,
Surely you at least may bring
Leisure to attend.

I have profit for your soul,
Also much delight.
Others almost reach the goal,
I attain it quite.

IMAGINATION

Imagination plays me most intolerable tricks.
To enumerate them all would be unbearably prolix.
Just a trifle bids them gather and a trifle bids them go.
And they tease me and torment me more than any one can
know.

Tricks of strange disordered action, tricks of strange dis-
ordered thought,
Tricks of seeking explanations most unprofitably sought.
But my will is learning daily, when the creatures growl
and leap,
That a stern voice and a stinging lash will drive them
back to sleep.

FRAGMENTS

Nothing of biography,
Nothing quite dramatic.
Study my geography
Till you grow rheumatic.

Other folks' psychology
Mixed with my sensations:
Fragments of biology
Edifying nations.

THE DESERT SHORE

My soul and I are cast away
Upon a desert shore,
Where never other soul will stray,
Nor ever did before.

Sweet airs and dreadful murmurs haunt
The spot. Strange shapes appear,
Fantastic visions that enchant,
Only to thrill with fear.

My God, are these and just my soul,
My little soul and I,
Condemned to dwell here through the whole
Waste of eternity?

FLEAS

My thoughts are like fleas,
 Eternally skipping,
I try as I please
 To prevent their slipping,
To probe them for more meant
 Then my wit can utter;
But out of the torment
 They quiver and flutter,
Dance, sparkle, and vanish
 With insolent ease.
To hold or to banish,
 My thoughts are like fleas.

THE DRONE

I might have been a worker, but I'm nothing but a drone.
I tell my idle stories in a philosophic tone.
In a fuzzy, spiny mantle of remoteness softly furled
I lie and watch with half-shut eyes the stupefying world.

And they bustle and they rustle with their self-consuming
din.

And eager feet go hurrying out and tired feet come in.
Like Bottom, when they hear a sound, they all must rush
to see.

They're always running after life. I let it come to me.

THE THING

I wish I had a body
A little more complete,
For mine is made of shoddy
From head unto the feet.

It serves me when admonished,
But serves me very ill.
I really am astonished
To find it serving still.

But yet perhaps I've vented
My anger quite astray;
For I shall be contented
To throw the thing away.

THE TESTAMENT

Poor Amiël made his testament
Of broken scraps of prose,
To which he daily, nightly went
And jotted down his woes.

I hasten at the dawn of day,
When light my dreams disperses,
To make my perishable clay
Imperishable verses.

YOURS?

If I should lay
My soul right bare,
You would shrink away,
And shudder and stare,
And cry, "in the whole
Wide world naught cures
Such a putrid soul"—
How about yours?

A NOVEL

Just write a novel. Oh,
 You'll find it most diverting:
The puppet souls are so
 Extremely disconcerting.

Their dainty dialogue
 Flits light before your fancy,
Not deft enough to dog
 Their footsteps gay and chancy.

But tell me—would you could—
 What sets my nerves a-twinkle,
Why the dear public should
 Pass by without a wrinkle.

SPARKLES

Strange fantasies oppress
My sorrow-crumpled brain,
A riot of distress,
A carnival of pain:

Sparkles and points of fear
That flash and dart and leap
And merge and disappear.—
And then I fall asleep.

HEINELET

They met, as it were, in a mist,
Pale, curious, eager, uncertain.
When each clasped the other and kissed,
The mist rolled aside like a curtain.

There were fields of delight to explore,
Where it seemed that their lips could not sever.—
Now their lips are as lone as before,
And the cold mist is thicker than ever.

NURSES, NURSES, NURSES!

I hear the tread of many feet
Along the quiet floor.
And someone's face I'm sure to meet
In every open door.

My soul's domain is widely free
For all to be included;
But I should like my house to be
A little more secluded.

CAN'T YOU

Oh, believe I wish you well.
But I will not haunt you,
Lie awake devising spell
 Or potion to enchant you.
Since I know that charms divine
 Cannot move or daunt you,
Go your way and I'll go mine.
 Leave me peaceful—can't you?

ROBERT E. LEE

I've followed you ten years, my Lee,
And I adore you more than ever,
Assured that nothing now can be
Of force my tie to you to sever.

If I could only touch your hand,
Or look into your eyes of kindness,
Perhaps your strength would help me stand
In all my groping and my blindness.

Or would there hang 'twixt you and me
The old veil fluttering in the middle?
And should I find you still to be,
Like God, an everlasting riddle?

THE SEAMSTRESS

I turn my spirit inside out
And let the March wind, blowing free,
Shake wide the creases boisterously
And scatter scraps and crumbs of doubt:

A spirit worn and full of holes,
With many a seam and many a patch
Of stuffs ill set that do not match.—
Oh, seamstress, who shall mend our souls?

NIGHT

I cannot weep, but I remember
In the silent night.

I cannot weep, but I remember
What has taken flight.

Like the blasts of stern December,
Chilling kindly sleep,
Come the things that I remember.
Yet I cannot weep.

THE COST OF LIVING

Just a little upset here:
Nurses running gaily;
Skirts appear and disappear,
Nightly trimmed and daily.

Riches, as we know, take wing.
See the dollars flying.
Living is a costly thing.
So, it seems, is dying.

After all, some good may be
In perpetual riot.
Friends of mine consider me
Much too fond of quiet.

BOOKS

Books, books, books,
Full of human souls,
Darting out in shoals,
Just like fish in brooks.

Armed with cunning hooks,
Baited for the prey,
I explore all day
Books, books, books.

Fulsere vere candidi tibi soles

CATULLUS.

Thy delightful suns have set.
All thy merriment forget:
Pleasant sojourn in green forest
When the woodman's weed thou worest,
Dainty wooing in long days
Splendid with the August blaze,
Song and dance and laughter merry
When rich autumn browns the berry.
Age was ne'er eluded yet.
Thy delightful suns have set.

THE SCHEULE

My schedule twitches at my sleeve
And insolently bids me leave
All inappropriate delight,
As, dainty meadows that invite,
And pleasant birds that idly sing,
And friends divinely gossiping,
And banquets neatly set and choice,
A loving hand, a wooing voice.
It lays a chilly touch on sleep
And will not even let me weep.—
Yet, though it does all this and more,
It is a mistress I adore.

THE TOPMOST BOUGH

Don't you love me now,
After all my sighing,
Swearing to you how
I'm dying, dying, dying?

Don't you love me now,
After I have set you
On love's topmost bough?—
God, then, I'll forget you.

THE CLINK

The clink of dollars scares the muse,
And crackling bills distract her.
With limitless contempt she views
An agent or contractor.

Rents, cheques, accounts absorb me now,
Leaks, janitors, and leases.
Wherever weeds of profit grow
High inspiration ceases.

HEINELET

Oh, come to my window, my dear,
When the stars are beginning to twinkle,
And the clatter of tongues we fear
Is no more than a vanishing tinkle.

Yes, hasten, and I will be there,
In what mood you prefer, mad or merry.
But, prithee, sweetheart, have a care,
For the world is malicious, oh, very.

ROSE AND RUE

A bit of rose and a bit of rue,
The rue for me and the rose for you.
For I am weary, unkempt, forlorn,
And you are fresh as an April morn,
Without desire, without regret.
And I remember and you forget.

EXIT GOD

Of old our father's God was real,
Something they almost saw,
Which kept them to a stern ideal
And scourged them into awe.

They walked the narrow path of right
Most vigilantly well,
Because they feared eternal night
And boiling depths of hell.

Now Hell has wholly boiled away
And God become a shade.
There is no place for Him to stay
In all the world He made.

The followers of William James
Still let the Lord exist,
And call Him by imposing names,
A venerable list.

But nerve and muscle only count,
Gray matter of the brain,
And an astonishing amount
Of inconvenient pain.

I sometimes wish that God were back
In this dark world and wide;
For though some virtues He might lack,
He had His pleasant side.

GOD

Day and night I wander widely through the wilderness of thought,

Catching dainty things of fancy most reluctant to be caught.

Shining tangles leading nowhere I persistently unravel,

Tread strange paths of meditation very intricate to travel.

Gleaming bits of quaint desire tempt my steps beyond the decent.

I confound old solid glory with publicity too recent.

But my one unchanged obsession, wheresoe'er my feet have trod,

Is a keen, enormous, haunting, never-sated thirst for God.





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